

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
MCT-02 SY-05 HA-05 /076 W
-----014558 100645Z /21

R 091100Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3280
INFO AMCONSUL BOMBAY
AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY DACCA
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMCONSUL MADRAS
CINCPAC

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: COMMUNAL VIOLENCE

REF: NEW DELHI 6549

1. ON AUGUST 8 PRIME MINISTER DESAI AND OTHER GOI MINISTERS
HELD THE THIRD IN A CONTINUING SERIES OF MEETINGS WITH OPPO-
SITION LEADERS TO CONSIDER THE ISSUE OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN
INDIA. THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION REPORTEDLY REACHED
AGREEMENT ON THE CREATION OF A MULTI-PARTY STANDING COMMITTEE
TO EVOLVE A COMMON APPROACH TO DEAL WITH COMMUNAL INDICENTS.
PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING ALSO SUGGESTED A NUMBER OF OTHER

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STEPS TO HEAD OFF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE: STRENGTHENING THE MACH-
INERY FOR VIGILANCE, RAPID PRE-EMPTIVE ACTION BY THE AUTHORI-
TIES TO PREVENT MINOR INCIDENTS FROM ESCALATING, AND RESTOR-
ING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE APPARATUS. THOSE
PARTICIPATING IN THE MEETING ALSO REPORTEDLY REACHED A CON-
SENSUS THAT ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN AGAINST ANY LOCAL JOURNALS
OR PUBLICATIONS WHICH VIOLATE THE LAW BY DELIBERATELY IN-

FLAMING COMMUNAL PASSIONS. THE PRIME MINISTER, HOWEVER, REJECTED THE IDEA THAT BLANKET PRESS CENSORSHIP SHOULD BE IMPOSED ON ANY AREA AFFECTED BY COMMUNAL VIOLENCE.

2. THE MEETING COMES SHORTLY AFTER A SERIES OF COMMUNAL CLASHES AROUND INDIA RECEIVED MAJOR PRESS ATTENTION. AMONG THESE WERE:

(A) IN VILLUPURAM (TAMIL NADU) A MINOR INCIDENT INVOLVING THE ALLEGED "TEASING" OF A HARIJAN GIRL SPARKED A SERIES OF CLASHES JULY 25-25 BETWEEN HARIJANS AND CASTE HINDUS. TWELVE PERSONS WERE REPORTEDLY KILLED AND CONSIDERABLE PROPERTY DAMAGE OCCURED BEFORE POLICE REINFORCEMENTS RESTORED ORDER. THE TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT HAS APPOINTED A JUDICIAL COMMISSION TO INQUIRE INTO WHAT CONGEN MADRAS DESCRIBED AS ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS COMMUNAL INCIDENTS IN THE STATE IN RECENT YEARS.

(B) IN MATTAN (JAMMU AND KASHMIR) HINDUS AND MUSLIMS CLASHED IN LATE JULY WHEN HINDU PILGRIMS TOOK OUT A PROCESSION TO THE NEARBY SHRINE IN AMARNATH CAVE. SEVERAL PERSONS WERE INJURED IN THE VIOLENCE WHICH IS REMINISCENT OF THE HINDU-MUSLIM CLASHES THAT REGULARLY OCCURED IN THE PAST YEARS ON RELGIOUS HOLIDAYS.

(C) MORE WIDESPREAD DISORDERS OCCURED JULY 27 TO AUGUST 6 IN THE MARATHWADA REGION OF CENTRAL MAHARASHTRA. THE TROUBLES LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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BEGAN WHEN THE STATE ASSEMBLY UNANIMOUSLY DECIDED TO RENAME MARATHWADA UNIVERSITY AFTER THE LATE DR. AMBEDKAR, A PROMINENT AND REVERED HARIJAN LEADER WHO WAS ALSO THE PRIME DRAFTER OF INDIA'S CONSTITUTION. ANGRY HIGH CASTE HINDUS, ESPECIALLY STUDENTS, OPPOSED THE NAME CHANGE AS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT'S SPECIAL FAVORS TOWARD HARIJANS AND LAUNCHED A PROTEST MOVEMENT. HARIJANS IN MARATHWADA, POLITICIZED BY THE NEO-BUDDHIST AND DALIT PANTHER MOVEMENTS, FOUGHT BACK. CLASHES IN AURANGABAD, POONA, NASIK AND NANDED LEFT AT LEAST TEN PEOPLE DEAD BEFORE THE CASTE HINDU ORGANIZERS CALLED OFF THEIR PROTEST ON AUGUST 6. A TEMPORARY CEASEFIRE IS NOW IN EFFECT, ALTHOUGH THE MARATHWADA REGION REPORTEDLY HAS NOT YET RETURNED TO NORMAL. THE RENAMING ISSUE IS AN INTRACTABLE ONE, SINCE TO GO AHEAD AND RENAME THE UNIVERSITY WOULD INFLAME CASTE HINDUS AND TO REFRAIN FROM DOING SO WOULD ANGER THE HARIJANS.

3. COMMENT: COMMUNAL VIOLENCE HAS LONG BEEN AN ENDEMIC FEATURE OF INDIAN SOCIETY. ALTHOUGH THE NUMBER AND SEVERITY OF SUCH INCIDENTS IS PROBABLY NO GREATER TODAY THAN, SAY A DECADE OR TWO AGO, SUCH VIOLENCE IS SYMPTOMATIC OF THE LATENT CASTE AND COMMUNITY DIVISIONS WHICH CONTINUE TO PREVAIL IN

SOCIETY. THERE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE A NATIONAL TREND OR PATTERN LINKING THESE INCIDENTS, BUT SEVERAL OBSERVERS HAVE NOTED THAT A NEW ELEMENT IS PRESENT IN MANY OF THEM: UNLIKE PAST DECADES, THE SUPPRESSED COMMUNITIES, PARTICULARLY THE HARIJANS, ARE TODAY GENERALLY BETTER EDUCATED AND MORE POLITICALLY CONSCIOUS. THEY ARE THUS MORE WILLING TO STAND UP FOR THEIR RIGHTS AND DEFEND THEIR INTERESTS.
GOHEEN

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: COMMUNITY RELATIONS, MEETINGS, OPPOSITION PARTIES, CIVIL DISORDERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 09 aug 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978NEWDE12116
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780327-0322
Format: TEL
From: NEW DELHI
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780882/aaaacraf.tel
Line Count: 124
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: c0e16d66-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 NEW DELHI 6549
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1792509
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: COMMUNAL VIOLENCE
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, IN, (DESAI, MORARJII)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/c0e16d66-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014